House of Commons

Science and Technology Committee

Annual Report 2003

First Report of Session 2003-2004

HC 169

House of Commons

Science and Technology Committee

Annual Report 2003

First Report of Session 2003-2004

Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 12 January 2004

HC 169
Published on 20 January 2004
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£0.00

The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of Science and Technology and its associated public bodies

Current membership

Dr Ian Gibson MP (*Labour, Norwich North*) (Chairman)
Paul Farrelly MP (*Labour, Newcastle-under-Lyme)*
Dr Evan Harris MP *(Liberal Democrat, Oxford West & Abingdon)*
Mr Tom Harris MP (*Labour, Glasgow Cathcart*)
Dr Brian Iddon MP (*Labour, Bolton South East*)
Mr Robert Key (*Conservative, Salisbury*)
Mr Tony McWalter MP (*Labour, Hemel Hempstead*)
Dr Andrew Murrison MP (*Conservative, Westbury*)
Geraldine Smith MP (*Labour, Morecambe and Lunesdale*)
Bob Spink MP (*Conservative, Castle Point*)
Dr Desmond Turner MP (Labour, Brighton Kemptown)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select Committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No.152. These are available on the Internet via www.parlliament.uk

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/science_and_technology_committee.cfm. A list of Reports from the Committee in the present Parliament is included at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Chris Shaw (Clerk), Emily Commander (Second Clerk), Alun Roberts (Committee Specialist); Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant) and Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary)

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to The Clerk of the Science and Technology Committee, Committee Office, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general inquiries is: 020 7219 2794; the Committee's e-mail address is: scitechcom@parliament.uk

Contents

Report

1 INTRODUCTION

1. This is the Committee's second Annual Report. Select committee annual reports follow a recommendation from the Liaison Committee for each committee to establish a set of core tasks against which to measure performance, with the aim of providing an improved structure for the scrutiny of Government departments by select committees. This Report sets the activities of the Committee over 2003 in the context of the 12 core tasks. These have been adapted from the Liaison Committee template to take account of the unique position of the Office of Science and Technology (OST) within the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the role of the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) in promoting the use of science across Government.[1] The Report also follows up some of the more general issues raised in last year's Annual Report and highlights some of the ways in which the Committee has exerted influence and provoked a response. Of course, measuring influence on policy is not an exact science—cause and effect are not always easily traced or readily acknowledged–so our examples included in Box 3 are necessarily subjective.

2. During the year we held 29 meetings and took oral evidence at 25 of them. We published eight Reports and pursued major inquiries into EU funding of science, light pollution and astronomy and the scientific response to terrorism. Most of our inquiries cover more than one of our core tasks and precise categorisation is not always easy. Table 1 provides an indication of how we have met our objectives in the year.[2] It includes Reports published as well as evidence sessions held in 2003.[3]

1 See Box 1 below.

2 A full list of Reports published this Parliament is included at the back of this Report. For a fuller statistical account of the Committee's activities, see the Sessional Return for 2002-03, HC 1 of 2003-04.

3 Inquiries announced in 2003 but for which no evidence sessions have not yet been held will be covered in next year's Annual Report.

Box 1: Committee Objectives and Core tasks

Objective A: To examine and comment on science and technology policy

Task 1: To examine policy proposals from the UK Government and the European Commission and other outputs from the Office of Science and Technology
Task 2: To conduct inquiries as appropriate, identifying and examining areas of emerging policy, or where existing policy is deficient, and making proposals
Task 3: To scrutinise legislation and proposed legislation on science and technology matters

Objective B: Government expenditure on science and technology

Task 4: To examine the expenditure plans and outturn of the Department of Trade and Industry, so far as it relates to science and technology, and of the Research Councils
Task 5: To examine other Government Departments' expenditure on research and advice on science and technology
Task 6: To monitor European Union expenditure on scientific research

Objective C: Administration of the Office of Science and Technology and the Research Councils

Task 7: To examine the Office of Science and Technology's objectives and performance
Task 8: To monitor the work of the Research Councils
Task 9: To scrutinise major appointments made by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry
Task 10: To examine the implementation of legislation and major policy initiatives, following up earlier Reports by the Committee
Task 11: To hold Ministers to account

Objective D: To assist the House in debate and decision

Task 12: To produce Reports informing the House on science and technology matters and of the science perspective on public policy issues, some of them being suitable for debate in the House, including Westminster Hall, or in debating committees

Table 1: Relationship of inquiries and evidence sessions to objectives and core tasks

Inquiries/Evid-ence Sessions	Objective A			Objective B			Objective C					Objec-tive D
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
MRC				✓	✓			✓				
ESRC Introductory								✓	✓			
DG Innovation Intro									✓			
Energy	✓			✓	✓			✓			✓	✓
Education White Paper	✓										✓	
NERC				✓				✓				
EU Science/UK						✓		✓				
Light Pollution	✓	✓			✓			✓			✓	✓
EPSRC				✓				✓				
Science/terror-ism		✓			✓			✓			✓	✓
Nano-technology		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
OST Scrutiny				✓			✓	✓			✓	
BBSRC				✓				✓				
MRC Introductory								✓	✓			

2 COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES AND OBJECTIVES

Objective A: To examine and comment on science and technology policy

Task 1: To examine policy proposals from the UK Government and the European Commission and other outputs from the Office of Science and Technology

3. Policy proposals from many different departments can have an impact on science and technology in the UK. For example, the Higher Education White Paper was published in January 2003.[4] In order to examine its proposals relating to research concentration and the split between research and teaching focussed institutions we held a joint evidence session on 26 March with the Secretaries of State for Education and Skills and for Trade and Industry. We have also pursued some of the issues raised in the White Paper with Research Councils and other witnesses during the course of our inquiries and continue to explore the potential impact of the proposals on the scientific community.

4. We delayed completion of our Report, *Towards a non-carbon fuel economy*, until the release of the Government's Energy White Paper.[5] Shortly after its publication in February 2003 we took evidence from the then Energy Minister, Brian Wilson, and the Chief Scientific Adviser and incorporated some strong criticisms about its contents in our subsequent Report.[6] During 2003 two separate but related reviews were carried out into innovation and business interaction with universities. We had hoped to examine the outcome of these important reviews in our annual session with the Science Minister, held in November, and in our 2003 OST Scrutiny Report. However, delays in the publication of both reports from the summer to December 2003 mean that this objective will have to be pursued in 2004.[7] We have also monitored the consultations on the sustainability of university research, the dual support system and on the implementation of the British Association's Science in Society report.

5. During the first half of the year we conducted a major inquiry based on the European Commission's Sixth Framework Programme, announced in November 2002. Our inquiry looked at EU mechanisms for conducting research and distributing funding to applicants as well as at how well the Government and Research Councils were supporting UK efforts to gain access to the €17.5bn on offer over the four year period from 2002.[8]

6. EU chemicals policy has been slowly developing over the course of 2003. It has attracted attention from many parts of the research community as well as from industry, animal rights groups and environmentalists. The European Commission published proposals for legislation on 29 October 2003. The same day we announced an inquiry into these new

4 Department for Education and Skills, *The Future of Higher Education*, Cm 5735, January 2003

5 Department of Trade and Industry, Energy White Paper, *Our energy future, creating a low carbon economy*, Cm 5761, February 2003

6 Fourth Report, Session 2002-03, *Towards a Non-Carbon Fuel Economy: Research, Development and Demonstration*, HC 55-I

7 Department of Trade and Industry, *Innovation Report*, December 2003; HM Treasury, *Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration, Final Report*, December 2003

8 Sixth Report, Session, 2002-03, *UK Science and Europe: value for money?*, HC 386-I

proposals in order to consider the implications of the changes made in the latest draft. We will take evidence in Westminster and in Brussels before producing a Report in the early part of 2004.

Task 2: To conduct inquiries as appropriate, identifying and examining areas of emerging policy, or where existing policy is deficient, and making proposals

7. The Government is still developing its response to the increased terrorist threat in the light of the events of September 11 2001. Our inquiry into the scientific response to terrorism looked at how the country's scientific resources were being used to help support and inform this response. We found evidence of a lack of co-ordination in the scientific response and recommended the establishment of a new Centre for Home Defence, a research facility dedicated to combating the terrorist threat. We also considered the security in UK research universities and institutions and criticised the culture of secrecy surrounding the Government's response to terrorism, which hampered the scientific response to an unnecessary degree.[9]

8. In July 2003 the Government provided some substance to the commitment announced the previous summer to supporting nanotechnology.[10] Immediately following Lord Sainsbury's announcement of £90m for this emerging technology we announced an inquiry into Government support for nanotechnology. The OST had already commissioned the Royal Society (RS) and the Royal Academy of Engineering (RAE) to undertake a study of the environmental, ethical, health and safety concerns arising from the technology. We met with both organisations in order to discuss our respective inquiries and avoid overlap. Our focus on the availability of infrastructure and the commercialisation of research will complement the RS/RAE study.[11]

9. In our inquiry into light pollution and astronomy we investigated the complaints from amateur astronomers about the consequences of the erosion of dark skies in the UK and the potential impact on the study of astronomy. We reported on the patchy efforts of local authorities and government to give light pollution proper consideration in planning and other policies and recommended that light pollution should be made a statutory nuisance in order to assist its control. [12] This latter issue is currently under consideration as part of a Government consultation exercise. We have reason to be optimistic that the Government is sympathetic to our arguments and look forward to the outcome of the public consultation.

Task 3: To scrutinise legislation and proposed legislation on science and technology matters

10. The Human Tissue Bill was announced in the November 2003 Queen's Speech and published on 3 December. This Bill seeks to prevent the misuse of human tissue and has potentially important implications for medical research in the UK. We regret that it was

9 Eighth Report, Session 2002-03, *The scientific response to terrorism*, HC 415-I

10 *Investing in Innovation: A strategy for science, engineering and technology*, July 2002, p. 68

11 See www.royalsoc.ac.uk/nanotechnology/

12 Seventh Report, Session 2002-03, *Light pollution and astronomy*, HC 747-I

not published in draft form prior to its introduction so as to give time for us to give it thorough consideration.

Objective B: Government expenditure on science and technology

Task 4: To examine the expenditure plans and outturn of the Department of Trade and Industry, so far as it relates to science and technology, and of the Research Councils

11. We consider the relevant parts of the DTI estimates and seek written explanations of the major changes as a matter of routine. Our main public examination of Government expenditure on science and technology took place in the annual session with the Science Minister. Written questions to him prior to and after this evidence session in November provided further information. The results of this session and our scrutiny throughout the year will be contained in our 2003 Scrutiny Report, to be published early in 2004.

12. Our rolling programme of scrutiny of each of the Research Councils involves careful study of their financial management and expenditure.[13] We have found evidence of poor financial management at the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). In particular, not all Research Councils dealt effectively with the introduction of Resource Accounting and Budgeting. Some examples we found of weak financial management are set out in Box 2. We hope that our criticisms in this respect will lead to improvements in these Research Councils and will provide an added incentive to the others to ensure that their financial houses are in good order.

Box 2: Research Council Financial Management

The Committee reported that:

MRC

- An over-commitment of grant funding in 1999–2000 resulted in a lack of funding available for grant awards in 2002 and too many top quality applications being turned down.
- There was poor financial forecasting and an imbalance in long-term and shorter-term funding.

NERC

- The failure to build up reserves in advance of the introduction of Resource Accounting and Budgeting was short-sighted.
- The cancellation of the July 2002 grant round due to financial difficulties was premature. *(It has since emerged that NERC finished FY 2002–03 with a £10m surplus roughly the estimated value of the cancelled July grant round.)*

13 See below, paras 18-22.

Task 5: To examine other Government Departments' expenditure on research and advice on science and technology

13. No fewer than 14 Government departments and agencies contributed to the Government's written evidence to our inquiry into the scientific response to terrorism. We subsequently took oral evidence from representatives of the Home Office, the Department of Health, the Ministry of Defence and Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). We visited the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down to examine the contribution of that facility to combating the terrorist threat. We also considered the role of the Chief Scientific Adviser in bringing together the scientific advice from all the relevant Government departments to form a coherent policy. Our inquiry into light pollution and astronomy involved gathering evidence from ODPM, the Department for Transport and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). It was clear that light pollution was not an issue on which these departments routinely co-operated. Our inquiry required these departments to consider the impact of their policies on stakeholders outside their usual circle and to develop a co-ordinated response to the concerns we raised.

14. Our energy inquiry involved looking at the approaches of both DEFRA and DTI to supporting renewable energy sources. The expenditure of the Department for Education and Skills on the dual support system of funding for science research in universities is of obvious interest to us and we were pleased to be able to question the Secretary of State in the context of his White Paper on Higher Education. In July we announced a major inquiry into the use of science in UK international development policy. As well as looking closely at how the Department for International Development (DFID) obtains and uses its scientific advice in developing its policies we will be examining how the policies and approaches of other departments with an interest—DTI, FCO, DEFRA—complement the role of DFID.

15. Our international development inquiry is part of our strategic plan to examine the use of science in some of the major Government departments and agencies. We were therefore interested to see that the Chief Scientific Adviser has established a new Science Review Directorate to provide external reviews of the quality and use of science in Government departments. The Review Team is beginning its work by looking at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We welcome this initiative and the fact that the reports will be published. **We fully support the efforts of the CSA to improve the contribution of science to policy development across Government and will be looking to follow up the findings of these reviews as necessary.**

Task 6: To monitor European Union expenditure on scientific research

16. Our inquiry into UK science and Europe investigated the effectiveness of the Framework Programme as a mechanism for supporting scientific research in the European Union (EU). The Government is taking forward our proposals for better mechanisms for assessing UK performance in the Framework Programmes, for greater transparency and efficiency in the application process and for a strengthening of UK support for potential UK applicants. We also called for a rebalancing of funding toward basic research in the development of the next Framework Programme. More specifically, our inquiry into nanotechnology has included a look at the €1.3bn devoted to the nanotechnology and

materials programme and our inquiry into EU chemicals policy will consider the proposed new European chemicals agency in Helsinki.

Objective C: Administration of the Office of Science and Technology and the Research Councils

Task 7: To examine the Office of Science and Technology's objectives and performance

17. We noted in last year's Annual Report that the information provided by DTI and OST was too general to allow any detailed assessment of their performance.[14] The DTI Departmental Performance Report still contains some vague measures and unsubstantiated assessments of performance. However, we are pleased to see that OST commissioned an independent report to develop a better set of indicators to compare the UK's performance against international competitors which will be used to produce targets and indicators for future Public Service Agreements. We will comment on these in our 2003 Scrutiny Report. We received written answers to questions on OST performance prior to our oral evidence session with the Science Minister, the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Director General of the Research Councils in November. We will publish this evidence with our 2003 Scrutiny Report early in 2004.

Task 8: To monitor the work of the Research Councils

18. We have set ourselves the target of examining all seven of the Research Councils over the course of the present Parliament. Following our Report on PPARC in December 2002 we have published Reports on MRC, NERC and EPSRC in 2003 and held an evidence session with BBSRC in December. We will hold a scrutiny session with the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils (CCLRC) in spring 2004 and with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) later in the year. We hope to examine the performance of Research Councils UK before the next general election and also look forward to taking a look at the Arts and Humanities Research Board when it is established as another Research Council.

19. We believe that our scrutiny of the individual Research Councils has improved as we have become familiar with the issues and have been able to compare performance and identify best practice. We believe that these exercises have served a useful purpose for the Councils themselves, in promoting self-analysis, and for the communities they serve, in providing more information about the way in which the Councils operate and in raising their profile. Our scrutiny has also served to promote best practice: we welcome the undertaking by Research Councils UK to look at our recommendations on the work of the Research Councils as a whole in order to share ideas and consider opportunities for further learning.[15] We have encouraged interested organisations and individuals to contribute to our inquiries. This evidence forms an important part of our scrutiny. **However, we are aware that many individual researchers have been reluctant to voice their concerns in public for fear of affecting future grant applications. We regret that these fears appear to be so widespread. We hope that Research Councils are not deliberately the cause of**

14 Second Report, Session 2002-03, *Annual Report 2002*, HC 260, para 20

15 Second Special Report, Session 2003-04, *Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report, Session 2002-03, The Work of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council*, HC 171.

such concerns and will take the necessary steps to counter them. We hope that some of the private representations we receive might in future be able to be published.

20. Our Reports have been generally supportive of the way in which the Research Councils go about funding science in their areas but have criticised certain aspects of performance.[16] We have been encouraged by the constructive manner in which the Research Councils have co-operated with our inquires and responded to our comments, although we were disappointed at the overly–defensive manner in which the MRC responded to our inquiry and Report.[17]

21. Apart from the evidence sessions directly related to the scrutiny inquiries we took evidence from the Director General of the Research Councils, Sir John Taylor, alongside the Science Minister and Chief Scientific Adviser. We also visited the five Research Councils based in Swindon in April, where we held meetings with the following two Councils to be scrutinised, NERC and EPSRC, and held a meeting with representatives from the others. We found this a very useful exercise in familiarising ourselves with the work of the Councils and in hearing some of their concerns in advance of the more formal scrutiny sessions. Following our visit to Swindon we went to Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in Oxfordshire in order to see and be briefed by the Chief Executive of CCLRC and others on the development of new facilities there.

22. The work of the Research Councils is central to many of our inquiries and we examined their performance and policies so far as they related to our inquiries into UK science and Europe, energy, the scientific response to terrorism and nanotechnology. Our introductory sessions with the new Chief Executives of ESRC and MRC also provided an opportunity to further our dialogue on the strategies and policies of these Research Councils.

Task 9: To scrutinise major appointments made by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

23. In questioning new appointees to important posts in the science world our objective is to gain an understanding of the priorities they have in taking up the reins and reminding them that we will be there to scrutinise their performance a little further down the road. We publish the minutes of such sessions and will produce short Reports where appropriate. In addition to the sessions with the new Chief Executives of ESRC and MRC mentioned above, we held introductory sessions with the new Director General of the Innovation Group, DTI, Mr David Hughes in January 2003. In 2004 we plan to see the incumbent of a new position, the Director General of Higher Education, Sir Alan Wilson, and the new Director General of the Research Councils, Sir Keith O'Nions.

16 See Box 2

17 The MRC's response to our Report will be considered in a Report on our introductory session with the Chief Executive of the MRC, Professor Colin Blakemore.

Box 2: Impact and results of the Committee's work

- Over 30 responses to our Report on the MRC were received from individuals, almost all supportive of the criticisms made.
- 127 memoranda of evidence were received on light pollution, many from amateur astronomers. The Committee is to be presented with an Award of Appreciation by the British Astronomical Association in recognition of our contribution to raising the profile of this issue. Our Report has added to pressure to make light pollution a statutory nuisance and produced a more "joined-up" approach to the issue.
- A more pro-active and strategic approach by Government to helping UK researchers and industry seek funding from EU Framework Programmes.
- Following our call for MRC's Co-operative Group Grant scheme to re-examined and reformed, an MRC working party concluded that it should be abolished.
- The Government is considering introducing an ethical code of conduct for scientists, as recommended in our Report on the scientific response to terrorism.
- An undertaking for more openness and transparency at the MRC and greater engagement with stakeholders by management.
- A more consistent and open approach to information provision and transparency among the Research Councils.
- EPSRC accepted our recommendation to adopt the best practice of other Research Councils in allowing contract researchers to apply for grants.

Task 10: To examine the implementation of legislation and major policy initiatives, following up earlier Reports by the Committee

24. Many of the issues raised in our previous Reports have some relevance to subsequent inquiries. We try to follow up some of these issues in the context of other inquiries—often with the same witnesses – rather than undertake formal follow-up inquiries. For example, our scrutiny sessions with the Research Councils have enabled us to pursue the recommendations contained in our Report on short term research contracts.18 We have frequently returned with witnesses to the conclusions of our Report on science education.19 Our concerns about the teaching of science have been echoed widely and there are strong signs that the Government is responding to calls for an improved science curriculum in developing new pilot schemes.

25. We have kept a close eye on development in the field of human fertilisation and embryology following on from earlier work on this subject by our predecessor

18 Eighth Report, Session 2001-02, *Short term research contracts in science and engineering*, HC 1046

19 Third Report, Session 2001-02, *Science Education from 14 to 19*, HC 508

Committees.[20] The Government rejected the view expressed in our 2002 Report that the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 was in need of updating.[21] Since then, a number of high profile legal challenges to the Act, new developments in reproductive science and the views of some influential figures have persuaded us to take a more detailed look at how well the 1990 Act is operating and the extent to which the development of new technologies in this field have rendered the provisions of the Act inadequate. We announced an inquiry into human reproduction and the law, preceded by an online consultation exercise, in October 2003.[22]

26. We have also continued to monitor the debate on the future of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) following our Report on this subject published in July 2002.[23] We received a private briefing from Sir Gareth Roberts, who has reviewed the mechanism used in the RAE, and canvassed opinions on it with academics and others during formal and informal sessions on other subjects. We look forward to examining the proposals Sir Gareth brings forward in 2004.

Task 11: To hold Ministers to account

27. Our trans-departmental remit involves taking evidence from Ministers in many different Government departments, depending on the inquiry. In 2003 we took evidence from Ministers in the Department of Health and the Home Office in connection with our inquiry into the scientific response to terrorism and from Ministers in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Department for Education and Skills (together) at the end of our inquiry into light pollution and astronomy. The Minister of State for Energy and Construction gave evidence on the Government's Energy White Paper for our inquiry into a non-carbon fuel economy. We aim to hold an annual evidence session with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. In 2003, this session was held jointly with the Secretary of State for Education and Skills and focussed on the Government's White Paper on Higher Education.

28. We aim to take evidence from the Science Minister, Lord Sainsbury, at least once a year. This session, held in November 2003, forms the basis of our annual OST scrutiny Report. It has been a long-standing regret of ours that this session represents the only formal occasion in which we as Members can properly hold the Science Minister to account. The Minister's membership of the House of Lords denies Members the opportunities enjoyed by members of other select committees to question Ministers during debates and at departmental question times. The absence of such opportunities does nothing to raise the profile of science in Parliament and beyond, another continuing commitment of ours. Lord Sainsbury shared our enthusiasm for helping people to understand and question science and reported on the lack of questions that he receives in

20 Third Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 1994-95, *Human Genetics: the Science and its Consequences*, HC 41; Fifth Report, Session 2000-01, *Genetics and Insurance*, HC 174; Fourth Report, Session 2001-02, *Developments in Human Genetics and Embryology*, HC 791

21 Department of Health, *Government Response to the Report from the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee: Developments in Human Genetics and Embryology*, Cm 5693, November 2002.

22 See http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/science_and_technology_committee/scitech241003.cfm

23 Second Report, Session 2001-02, *The Research Assessment Exercise*, HC 507

the House of Lords on the subject.[24] We were very pleased therefore that he agreed to our suggestion of holding more regular sessions with the Committee to discuss topical issues of science policy. **We believe that these half hour "science question times" will provide a focus for science in Parliament and allow elected Members to question the Science Minister on Government policies with an impact on science and technology.** The first such session will be held in February and will focus on the Innovation Report, published in December. We aim to hold such sessions every three months.

Objective D: To assist the House in debate and decision

Task 12: To produce Reports informing the House on science and technology matters and of the science perspective on public policy issues, some of them being suitable for debate in the House, including Westminster hall, or in debating committees

29. We published eight Reports in 2003 across a range of subjects. Amongst other things, our Reports provided a scientific and technological perspective to the debates on renewable energy and the fight against terrorism and also highlighted the impact of light pollution on the scientific community. Two of our Reports, together with Government Replies, were debated in Parliament. On 3 April, six members of the Committee participated in a well attended debate in Westminster Hall on our Report on *Science education from 14 to 19,* to which the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education replied.[25] On 12 June our Report, *Towards a non-carbon fuel economy*, was debated in a joint debate on energy issues together with Reports from the Environmental Audit and Trade and Industry Committees.[26] Three members of the Committee contributed to the broad debate, to which the Minister for Energy and Construction replied. A debate on our Report on *Light pollution and astronomy* will be held in Westminster Hall on 12 February 2004.

3 OTHER COMMENTS

Government Replies

30. We made some criticisms last year of both the timeliness and content of Government Replies. This year we can record significant progress. Six of the eight Government Replies published during the year were received in line with the established two month deadline and no Reply was more than two weeks late. The average time taken to respond was therefore reduced from four and a half months last year to a shade over two months in 2003. We were also consulted in advance over any slight delays. **We welcome this improvement.**

31. In general, the Replies we received were thorough and constructive. However, there was a tendency for these Replies to restate existing policy and set out those measures

24 Minutes of evidence for Monday 10 November 2003; www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmsctech/cmsctech.htm#uncorr

25 HC Deb, 3 April 2003, cols. 327-370WH

26 HC Deb, 12 June 2003, cols. 309-352WH

already being taking rather than responding directly to any criticisms made in the Reports. We would rather that the Replies focussed on new measures and developments since the Government gave evidence or our Report was published. This has not always been the approach. **We hope that the Government will use Replies to engage with the arguments, signal new developments and progress debate rather than simply restate existing policy.**

32. We have noticed an increasing tendency for Ministers and departments to respond instantly to Committee Reports rather than wait for the formal Government Reply. We accept that in an age of rebuttal and "pre-buttal" the Government will seek to minimise the impact of any criticisms made. But on occasion these instant responses have misrepresented the Committee's Report or given wrong information. Following the publication of our Report on the scientific response to terrorism the Home Office Minister, Beverly Hughes, responded directly to the complaints we had made about Government co-operation with our inquiry. Her assertion that the problems had been resolved by a meeting between the Chairman and the then Minister responsible, Lord Falconer, was simply wrong: the ODPM sought to withdraw witnesses from a subsequent evidence session at the last minute. **Such blatant attempts to rewrite the record, whilst not in themselves hugely significant, serve to undermine relations with committees and also to underline the benefits of reserving judgement until the properly considered response in the formal Government Reply.**

Relations with OST and Government departments

33. We have enjoyed good relations with OST throughout the year. We are under no illusions that good scrutiny generates a considerable amount of work for Government. We make no apology for this. OST is a small part of the DTI but, as we said last year, it is up to the Minister to ensure that there are sufficient resources to cope with our demands. We are pleased to report that there has been an improvement in communication with the Committee over the year. We have generally been kept informed of forthcoming announcements and have been supplied with the information on performance we need to carry out our job. We are also grateful to OST for providing rapid answers to our questions prior to our annual session with the Science Minister. We look forward to this higher level of service being maintained.

34. Unfortunately, the high levels of co-operation have not always been matched by other Government departments. Our Report on *The scientific response to terrorism* records the difficulties we experienced with the Home Office, the Department for Transport and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in securing witnesses to give evidence during the inquiry.[27] Our inquiry was significantly impaired by the actions of the Government. The Chairman of the Committee has taken up this issue with the Liaison Committee. We understand that it will consider Government co-operation with select committees as part of a wider look at the lessons to be drawn by select committees from the Hutton Inquiry.

27 HC (2002-03) 415-I, paras 226-8

Working methods and innovation

35. We have taken as many opportunities as possible to engage with the science community and promote a dialogue between politicians and scientists, both during and outside the context of our specific inquiries. During our inquiry on light pollution we were pleased to be able to pay a night time visit to the Royal Observatory Greenwich to observe the stars and to meet members of a number of astronomical societies. This visit gave us a real flavour of the issues involved and enabled far more amateur astronomers to put their concerns directly to us than would be possible in formal oral evidence sessions. At the end of the inquiry, instead of holding a single press conference to publicise our Report, individual Committee members launched it at appropriate constituency venues to emphasise the local as well as national impact of light pollution. These launches contributed to a large amount of publicity, both local and national, for this Report.

36. We are holding an online consultation exercise at the outset of our inquiry into human reproduction and the law. Our inquiry seeks to establish how the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Act 1990 needs to be amended to take account of new developments in reproductive medical science since then. The e-consultation exercise is designed to attract the comments of both experts in the field and people with relevant personal experiences who perhaps would not normally submit formal evidence to a select committee. We hope that this approach will flush out all existing and some future problems with the current legislation and identify areas which we need to pursue further in the inquiry. **This will be the first time a select committee has used an online consultation exercise to frame the terms of reference of a subsequent formal inquiry.**

Formal minutes

Monday 12 January

Members present:

Dr Ian Gibson, in the Chair

Paul Farrelly Dr Evan Harris

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Annual Report 2003), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 36 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

[Adjourned till Monday 19 January at 4.00pm.

Reports from the Science and Technology Committee since 2001

Session 2002–03

First Report	The Work of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council *(Reply HC 507)*	HC 161
Second Report	Annual Report 2002	HC 260
Third Report	The Work of the Medical Research Council *(Reply Cm 5834)*	HC 132
Fourth Report	Towards a Non-Carbon Fuel Economy: Research, Development and Demonstration *(Reply HC 745)*	HC 55-I
Fifth Report	The Work of the Natural Environment Research Council *(Reply HC 1161)*	HC 674
Sixth Report	UK Science and Europe: Value for Money? *(Reply HC 1162)*	HC 386-I
Seventh Report	Light Pollution and Astronomy *(Reply HC 127, 2003-04)*	HC 747-I
Eighth Report	The Scientific Response to Terrorism	HC 415-I
Ninth Report	The Work of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council *(Reply HC 169, 2003-04)*	HC 936

Session 2001-02

First Report	Cancer Research – A Follow-Up *(Reply Cm 5532)*	HC 444
Second Report	The Research Assessment Exercise *(Reply HC 995)*	HC 507
Third Report	Science Education from 14 to 19 *(Reply HC 1204)*	HC 508-I
Fourth Report	Developments in Human Genetics and Embryology *(Reply Cm 5693)*	HC 791
Fifth Report	Government Funding of the Scientific Learned Societies *(Reply HC 53)*	HC 774-I
Sixth Report	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts: A Follow-Up *(Reply HC 276)*	HC 1064
Seventh Report	The Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2002 *(Reply HC 293)*	HC 860
Eight Report	Short-Term Research Contracts in Science and Engineering *(Reply HC 442)*	HC 1046